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**Withdrawing from Exhibits:
the interactional organisation of museum visits**

to be published in

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March 2011

Introduction

Museum visiting is an activity, organised in and through social action and interaction. People walk slowly from exhibit to exhibit, examine some objects whilst walking past others, without bumping into others or crossing each other’s line of sight. The social organisation that facilitates the exploration of exhibitions largely without disturbing each other’s involvement with the works of art is often ascribed to “museum discipline” (Hirschauer 2006); “visitors’ bodies [being] controlled by an ‘organised walking’ of contrived route, speed, gestures, speaking and sound” (Borden 2006). It is argued museum discipline is created by a design and layout of exhibitions that facilitates “scopic reciprocity” (Huang 2009); the open spaces of museums “allow for visitors not only to inspect the exhibits but also to allow for the visitors to be the objects of each other’s inspection” (Bennett 1995: 51-52; cf. Trondsen 1976).

Visitor research reflects the assumption that the design of the physical environment shapes people’s conduct in and experience of exhibits and exhibitions. It examines the ways in which particular features of the material and social environment stimulate particular behavioural responses (Bitgood 1992; Bitgood and Dukes 2003). By elaborating on these environmental factors research in visitor studies aims to predict behaviour (Dierking, Koran, Dreblow and Falk 1985). Although visitor research includes people as an environmental factor in its models it rarely examines the specifics of the social organisation of behaviour (for exceptions see for example, Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson 2002; McManus 1987). As visitor research primarily relies on a stimulus-response model it ignores how social interaction impacts people’s exploration and experience of exhibitions and fails to acknowledge sociological concepts of social interaction and mobility.

A body of research concerned with behaviour in public spaces like museums has emerged in sociology and cognate areas of research. By drawing on the important research by Goffman (1963; 1971) and Lofland (1985; 1998) studies suggest that people employ an organisation when walking and queuing that makes public places like pavements and street-crossings look “orderly” (Ciolfi 2004; Collett and Marsh 1981; Kendon; 1990; Laurier and Brown, 2008; Livingston 1987; Ryave and Schenkein 1974; Watson and Lee 1993).

This chapter adds to this body of research by investigating in detail how people explore museums. Underlying this question is our ongoing concern with an understanding of “practical aesthetics” (Heath and vom Lehn 2004), namely with the ways in which people, in mundane circumstances, experience works of art in museums and galleries. It inspects video-excerpts of interaction in museums to explore how people move between exhibits without disturbing or even interrupting each other’s appreciation of works of art. Based on the analysis it argues that people’s actions in museums are based on a sequential organisation that becomes visible and is experienced as “orderly”. Before I come to discuss the specific circumstances in which people socially organise the exploration of exhibitions I briefly discuss the methods through which the data were gathered and analysed.

Methodological Considerations

The paper has arisen as part of a programme of research concerned with people’s conduct and interaction in museums (Heath and vom Lehn 2004; Hindmarsh, Cleverly, Heath and vom Lehn 2005; vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh 2001; vom Lehn 2006). The research explores how people experience exhibits in interaction with

companions and others and is concerned with how different kinds of exhibit facilitate, engender or undermine particular forms of participation and collaboration.

The analysis is primarily based on video-recordings of visitors’ interaction with and around exhibits. The data have been gathered in a range of museum and gallery including the National Gallery, Tate Britain and Tate Modern (all in London). They feature a wide range of visitors, including individuals, pairs and couples, families and small groups as well as larger groups and guided tours. Altogether together with my colleagues I have collected approximately 700 hours of video and conducted informal interviews with visitors, curators and exhibition designers.

The use of video-recordings of people in public places requires particular ethical and practical considerations. For the purpose of this study, we informed the visitors and secured their support by placing signs at the entrances of the galleries. The notices explained the purpose of the research and that data would be used for research and teaching purposes only. They also provided visitors with the opportunity to refuse to be recorded and to have the recordings wiped if they were unhappy in any way. Many visitors read the signs and a small number of visitors approached the researcher to discuss the nature of the project further; no visitors refused to participate.

For the collection of the video-data we used one or two conventional video-cameras mounted on tripods that were unobtrusively placed in the galleries. The cameras pointed along the gallery walls filming people’s navigation and interaction at exhibits. For the collection of the data, the researcher left the camera to record and only returned to change tapes. During the recording the researcher took field notes of events at the exhibits. The notes together with other materials, such as informal interviews with visitors and the exhibition management, exhibit specifications, copies of labels, gallery guides and the like, provide important resources with which to

situate and understand the conduct and interaction of visitors. For example, it is not unusual for people to selectively voice the content of labels to others as they examine an exhibit. The analysis of the interaction considers how participants occasion, embed, or transform, this information within their interaction.

Video and audio recording inevitably provide a selective view of events, and while this view may encompass a broad range of actions and activities that arise at an exhibit, it can be useful to know what else may be happening more generally within the scene. As part of the data collection therefore field observations, information from materials and comments from interviews and discussions are systematically interleaved, with recorded data, and where relevant, take these into account in the analysis of the participants’ action and interaction.

The analysis draws on Goffman’s (1963, 1971) studies of behaviour in public places and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and conversation analysis (Sacks 1992). It primarily focuses on the action and interaction of visitors, their talk, visual and material conduct. It draws on the growing body of research concerned with the social and interactional organisation of visual, vocal and tactile aspects of human conduct (Goodwin 1981, Heath 1986). The approach directs analytic attention towards the resources, the practices and reasoning on which participants rely in the production of social actions and activities and in making sense of the conduct of others. It focuses in particular on the sequential character of participants’ conduct and the ways in which they coordinate their examination of exhibits with others, both those they are ‘with’ and others who happen to be in the ‘same space’.

The thrust of the analysis has been developed with regard to the recorded data. It proceeds on a ‘case by case’ basis and involves the highly detailed examination of particular actions with regard to the immediate context and a particular interactional

environment in which they arise. The analysis involves the transcription of participants’ talk and bodily action and the detailed examination of the interactional character of particular actions and activities (Goodwin 1981, Have 1998). By comparing and contrasting actions and activities between various excerpts we begin to identify patterns of conduct and interaction. More detailed discussions of the practicalities of data collection and analysis can be found in various publications by Goodwin (1981, 1994) and Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff (2010).

For the purpose of this chapter, we have inspected the data corpus for instances where people bring their examination of a work of art to a close and move to a next exhibit. Based on the screening process we have produced a collection of excerpts that allows us to compare and contrast events with another to identify reoccurring patterns in visitors’ departure from exhibits. The excerpts discussed in this chapter have been selected from this collection of instances as they provide particularly clear examples to reflect the more common themes that have emerged from the analysis of the data (cf. Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff 2010; vom Lehn and Heath 2006).

Proposing Departure

Theories and research on art perception suggest that aesthetic experience is best achieved in solitude and through individual engagement with a work of art (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). In museums such individual, undisturbed encounters with works of art are rare as exhibitions are public places explored by a multitude of people at the same time. Goffman (1971) characterises public places as domains where people go about their business in the presence of others.

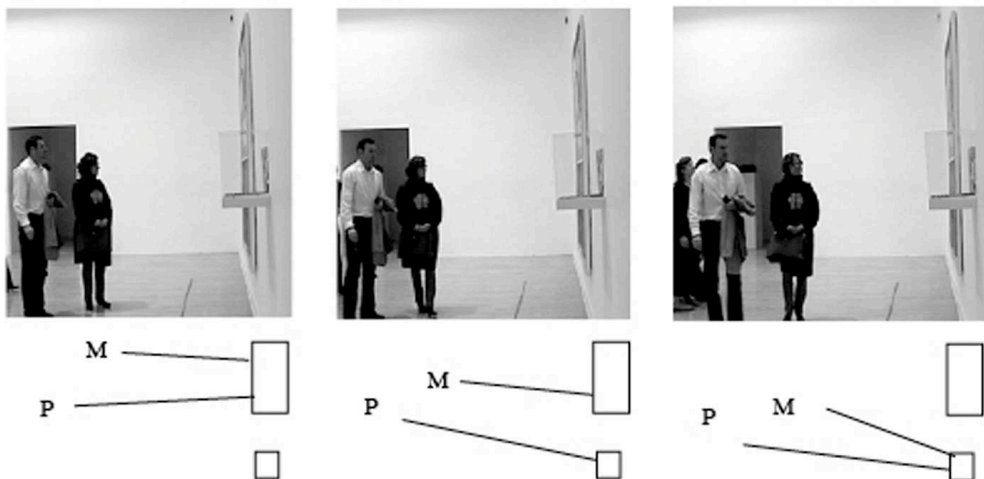
When looking at a painting, companions often stand side-by-side and create a “use space” (Gofman 1971) between themselves and the exhibit whilst other visitors keep some distance to them. Companions standing side-by-side often independently

examine a piece without talking before jointly moving on to another part of the museum. In excerpt 1 (Figures 1-3) two visitors, Paul (P) and Mary (M), stand side-by-side in front of a large canvas before moving on to the right. The accomplishment of the joint departure from the painting is an example of the “artful” (Ryave and Schenkein 1974) organisation of human conduct in galleries. It begins after the pair has examined the piece for twenty seconds or so. During this period they do not talk or engage the companion in other ways in interaction, allowing each other space and time to appreciate the work of art.

Figure 1

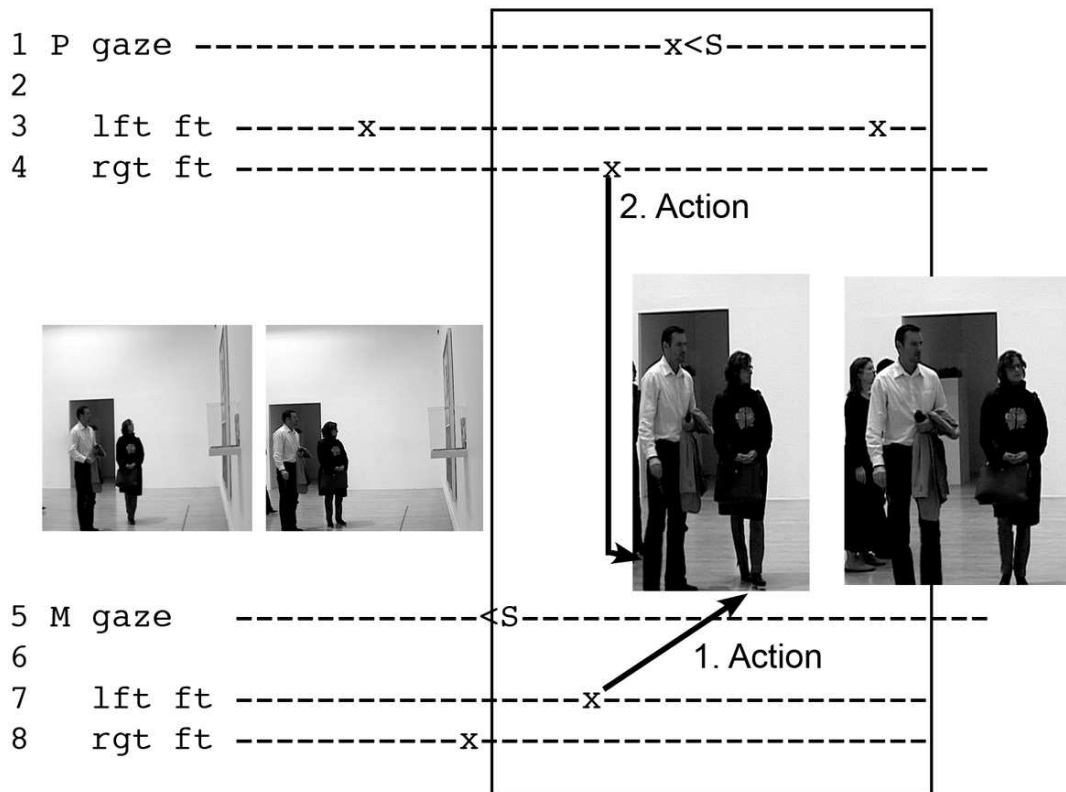
Figure 2

Figure 3



They manage their actions in a way that provides each with “elbow room” (Hughes 1958), facilitating a social organisation of their individual involvement with the piece. After a short while, the pair begins to withdraw from the work of art. The departure from the painting becomes visible as a joint and organised onward movement to the neighbouring exhibit. A detailed examination of the last few moments of the excerpt suggests that the concerted departure from the painting relies on two actions through which the participants bring their looking at the painting to a close and shift their orientation to another exhibit (Excerpt 1, Transcript 1a).

Excerpt 1 - Transcript 1a



<P/S - look to painting/sculpture

lft/rgt ft - Left and Right Foot

x - onset of movement/change in orientation

The two actions markedly differ from the other bodily movements the visitors produce in front of the piece. They foreshadow a shift in orientation away from the large painting and towards the sculpture to its right. Paul moves his right foot backwards (Transcript 1a, line 8) and then turns his head from the painting to the sculpture on the right (Transcript 1a, line 5). His slight shift in orientation is the *second* action in the sequence. It arises in light of Mary's *first* action who a moment earlier carefully shoves her left foot forward and turns her upper body to the right

(Transcript 1a, line 7). Mary produces her action after having stood in front of the painting with her upper and lower body oriented to the piece. The slight visible turn to the right contrasts with her bodily orientation while she looks at the painting. It suggests that Mary may be ready to move on to the right. And indeed, Paul’s movement of the right foot and turn of the head suggest that he treats her action as a proposal to bring the inspection of the painting to a close. He aligns with the proposed departure to the right and they jointly move along the gallery wall.

The relationship between the two actions, “proposal” and “acceptance”, is tightly organised. Paul’s shift in bodily and visual orientation is produced in immediate juxtaposition to Mary’s slight and careful foot movement; he attends to his companion’s foot movement and bodily turn by treating it as a proposal to move on. The treatment of Mary’s action as a proposal to depart from the painting is encouraged by the way in which her action contrasts to her involvement with the piece. She stands still with her head and upper body oriented to the painting until her left foot moves forward to the right, pointing away from the painting; Paul’s subsequent shift in orientation displays that her bodily movement can be seen as proposing a departure to the right. He aligns with the proposal by moving his right foot backward and turning to the right.

The pair’s departure from the painting to the sculpture suggest that as people withdraw from an exhibit they orient to exhibits they may examine next. Paul turns to the right and looks to the sculpture attached to the wall; the sculpture being constituted as a candidate exhibit that the pair may examine next. Shifts in orientation like Paul’s often converge with the route through the gallery suggested by the layout of the exhibition; visitors using the visibility of the next exhibit as a resource to produce a “trajectory” (Heath and Luff 2000). The convergence of the trajectory and

the exhibition layout is particularly evident in art exhibitions with works of art hung along the gallery walls.

In excerpt 2, Pete and Jane stand side by side reading a text-panel hung between two photographs to their right (Figure 2.1.). A few moments later, they both have turned their heads and upper bodies to the left and continue their movement along the gallery wall (Figure 2.3.). Their shift in orientation arises a moment after Pete turns his head to the left (Figure 2.2.). The turn of the head displays that he has brought his involvement with the text-panel to a close and proposes an onward movement to the left. He produces the trajectory of the visit that a moment later Jane aligns with. She treats her partner’s shift in orientation as a proposal to move on and aligns with it. She accepts the proposal, turns her head and body to the left and then moves on, with Pete falling into her step (Figure 2.3.).

Figure 2.1.



Figure 2.2.



Figure 2.3.



In Excerpt 3, the participants’ departure from the painting they have looked at together begins when Theresa turns her head away from the painting and looks to a large canvas near the ceiling to their left (Figure 3.1.). By ending her examination of the painting in front and looking to a piece further along the gallery wall the woman produces a trajectory of the visit to the left. Her shift in visual orientation proposes an onward movement to the left which her companion aligns with a moment later. He turns to the left and looks to the next painting (Figure 3.2.).

Figure 3.1.



Figure 3.2.



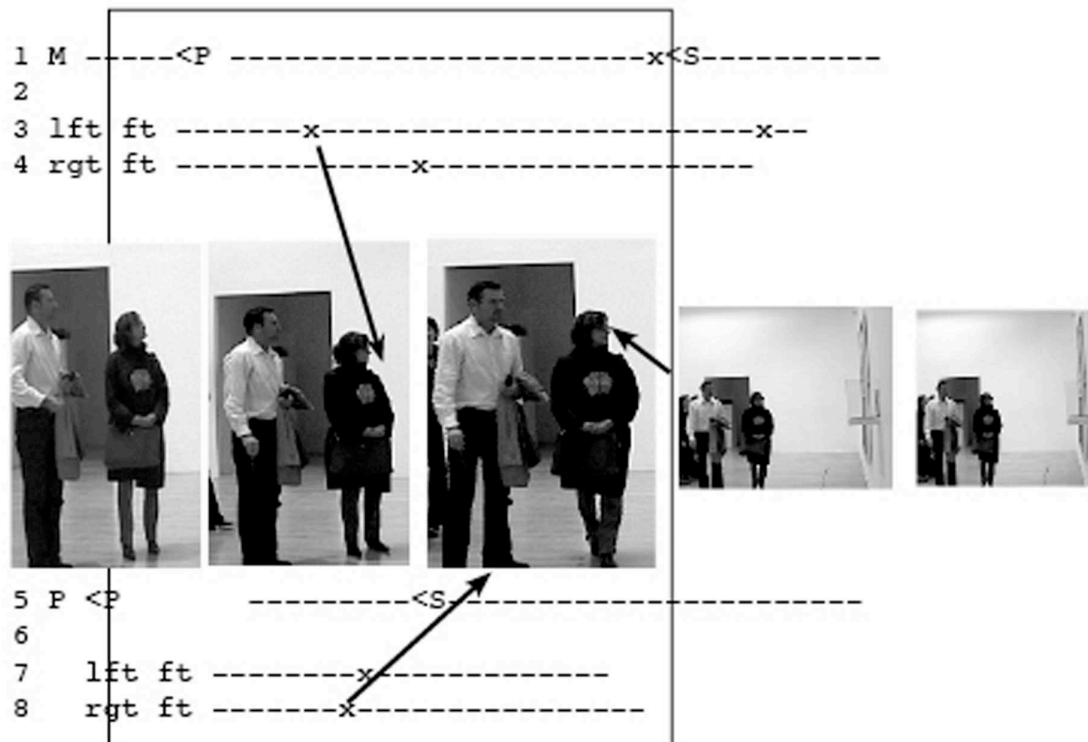
Figure 3.3.



While Theresa looks to the piece near the ceiling Joseph continues his examination of the piece they have looked at together a moment before. Joseph treats Theresa’s shift in orientation as a proposal to withdraw from the painting in front, and they both depart to the right. He accepts the proposal and turns first his left foot and then his upper body and head to the left, ready to approach the painting hung on the wall underneath the large canvas Theresa is looking at. On the onset of Joseph’s shift in orientation Theresa tilts her head down and falls into her companion’s step. They both jointly depart from the painting and turn to look at the next exhibit to the left (Figure 3.3.).

The joint departure from paintings arises when visitors who for some time have simultaneously but independently examined a work of art bring the appreciation of this piece to a close and jointly move on to another. The two-part sequence of action comprised of proposal and acceptance arises after the visitors have displayed for each other that they are ready to move on. Let us briefly examine excerpt 4, a sequence of actions produced a moment prior to the proposal-acceptance sequence inspected in excerpt 1.

Excerpt 4 - Transcript 4b (Excerpt 1)



Just a moment before Mary moves her left foot forward to the right she stands in front of the large canvas visually and bodily oriented to the piece. As she stands in this viewing position Mary progressively tilts her head downward until she has looked at the bottom of the work of art. When her head arrives at the downward position Mary moves her left foot slightly to the right. Her foot movement coupled with the tilting of her head displays that she may be ready to bring the appreciation of the piece to a close. Mary’s action that allow the presumption she might be ready to depart preface the proposal to bring the examination of the painting to a close. Paul attends to her initial foot movement by sliding his right foot backward encouraging his companion to extend her withdrawal from the piece (Excerpt 4b: Transcript 4b).

This brief sequence of actions a moment prior to the production of the proposal implies that Mary might be ready to bring her appreciation of the piece to a close and depart to the right. The design of her foot movement embodies a sensitivity and deference to Paul’s ongoing involvement with the painting. It allows him to bring his examination of the piece to a close while preparing himself to withdraw from the canvas a moment later. His subsequent shift in bodily and visual orientation suggests that the sculpture to the right may be an exhibit they might approach next.

The departure from an exhibit is comprised of a two-part sequence of actions; an initial action proposes the withdrawal from the piece participants currently look at and produces a trajectory of the museum visit, the departure to a next exhibit. This first action is carefully designed paying deference to the companion’s ongoing appreciation of the piece. By virtue of its design the first action contrasts with the prior involvement of the artwork; the involvement with the piece is characterised by a visual and bodily orientation to the object and little bodily movement. When in immediate juxtaposition to an action that displays a possible withdrawal from the piece the co-participant can accept it by producing an action that treats the first action as a proposal to jointly depart from the piece in front. The visitors then jointly depart from the exhibit.

The sequence of actions comprised of proposal and acceptance is often prefaced by a brief sequence through which participants mutually display that they have brought the appreciation of a work of art to a close. A visitor produces an action such as a head or a foot movement suggesting that s/he is ready to move on without disturbing or nudging the companion to depart from the exhibit. The action is carefully designed and pays deference to the companion’s ongoing state of involvement with the work of art. It renders visible the visitor’s readiness to move on without disturbing or even

nudging the other forward. Only when the companion displays an alignment with the suggested departure the proposal is produced by extending the withdrawal from the piece in front encouraging the companion to align with the proposed course of actions.

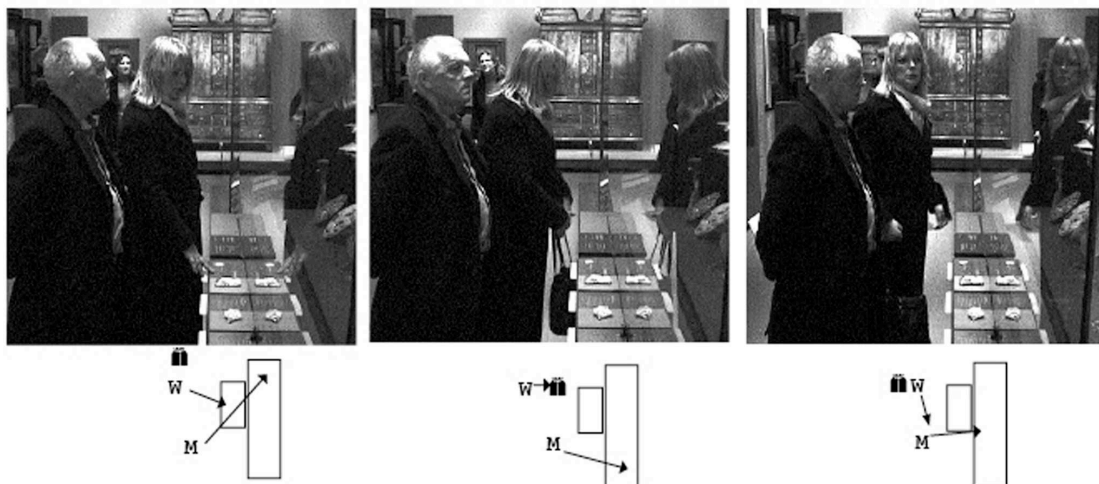
Upgrading Proposals

Visitors are visible as “Withs” (Goffman 1971) that is together in the museum by virtue of the tight organisation of their exploration of exhibitions, stand and walk side-by-side and sequentially organise their departure from exhibits. In some cases, the tight organisation deployed in the departure of exhibits can be perturbed when a member of a Withs does not immediately align with the proposed trajectory of the visit. Consider excerpt 5 where Willa and Mike look at 18th century glass- and stoneware displayed in and in front of a large glass-case.

Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.3.



The participants stand side-by-side in front of the case, Mike examining objects in the top left corner cabinet and Willa to his left looking at objects in the bottom centre of the case (Figure 5.1.). After a few moments, Willa has turned to her handbag,

swapping it from her left to her right hand, suggesting that she is ready to depart from the glass-case. She produces her action immediately after Mike has turned his head from the left to the right (Figure 5.2.). Such changes in visual orientation are often considered to be opportune moments when proposals to move on can be put forward. However, despite maybe noticing the proposal companions sometimes have not exhausted their examination of an exhibit continue their involvement with it. When Willa turns her upper body to the right she proposes an onward movement in that direction. Mike however remains oriented to the glass-case and on Willa’s bodily turn moves his head to the left looking to plates displayed in the bottom centre of the cabinet (Figure 5.3.).

Willa cannot be sure whether Mike has noticed that she is ready to move on. After she has turned her body and head to the right she sees that Mike still stands facing the cabinet and looks to the plates in its bottom centre. She treats his orientation to the objects in the case as a display of his continued interest in the stoneware by returning her visual orientation to the plates in the cabinet. While having her lower and upper body turned slightly to the right Willa looks to the objects before leaning her upper body slightly toward his left shoulder (Figure 5.4.). Mike attends to this bodily movement by his companions by moving his body first slightly backwards and then to the right. In response to his action Willa extends her withdrawal from the piece treating Mike’s backward movement as an acceptance of her proposal to depart from the cabinet. She turns her body further to the right encouraging Mike to continue his withdrawal from the exhibit. A moment later the two participants are on their way to another part of the gallery (Figure 5.5.).

Figure 5.4.

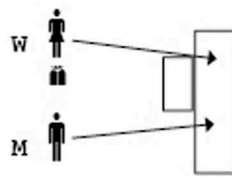
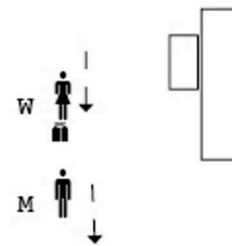


Figure 5.5.



Declining a proposal to move on may delay visitors’ departure from an exhibit. It may encourage participants to shift their orientation back to the exhibit and continue its examination. A few moments later, the participants turn away from the exhibit and move elsewhere. Their joint departure is often occasioned by an embellished or upgraded version of the initial proposal to withdraw from an exhibit.

The departure from an exhibit is often undertaken in aligning participants’ orientation to a candidate exhibit. The provision of such a candidate exhibit may be produced by virtue of the first or the second action. For example, in excerpt 1 Paul orients to the sculpture to the right of the large canvas when treating his companion’s first action, the movement of her foot to the right, as a proposal to move on. Consider excerpt 6 where Jo and Paula jointly look at a painting and read information in the associated label attached to the wall at the right of the piece. After a few moments, Paula turns her head to the neighbouring exhibit and describes it as “self-portrait”. Her actions involve a bodily withdrawal from the piece in front coupled with an

utterance that provides a description of the next exhibit, “another self-portrait here” (line 17). Immediately following Paula’s actions Jo to her right lifts her body up and turns to the right looking towards the next painting (Figure 6.4.).

Paula’s description of the next picture coupled with her embellished bodily turn toward it is her second proposal to depart from the painting they have been looking at until now. Her talk and visible actions are produced after Jo has declined Paula’s earlier turn to the neighbouring piece as a proposal to move on. Having looked at the self-portrait for a few moments Paula lifts her body up and turns her head to the right while producing an in-breath, “.hhh”, followed by an “outloud” (Goffman 1981), “sesese” (line 17) (Figure 6.2.). Jo declines the proposal; she keeps her bodily comportment unchanged, has her upper body and head tilted forward and continues to read the label. Only on completion of the second proposal Jo attends to her friend’s action and treats it as a proposal to move to the next exhibit.

We can see that a co-participant may not immediately attend to and align with a companion’s proposed trajectory; she remains oriented to the exhibit displaying her continued involvement with the piece in front. Her involvement with the exhibit is sufficient as an account for declining the proposal to depart from the piece. The participant does not further probe the reason for the ongoing involvement but in turn attends to the lack in alignment with delaying her own departure and then by producing an upgraded or sometimes embellished version of the original proposal to depart from the exhibit. By upgrading the proposal the participant again displays her readiness to depart from and suggests a possible next exhibit to approach.

Excerpt 6

13 J: thats the sort of darkness=



Figure 6.1.

14 P: =yah:

15 (3.3)

Figure 6.2.

16 P: .hhh sesese

(Jo turns to
label)

(.5)



Figure 6.3.

17 P: another self-portrait here

(Jo turns from label
to neighbourng painting)



Figure 6.4.

18 J: mhm



The upgraded proposal is produced at a moment when it is likely that the co-participant will notice it. In the case in hand, for example, Paula produces the

upgraded proposal just when Jo turns from the label to the painting in front. Jo’s shift in orientation suggests a change in her involvement with the piece that Paula tries to exploit when again proposing to depart from the exhibit. The upgraded proposal implies the trajectory produced a few moments earlier; it is often designed to increase its noticeability by virtue of exaggerated bodily movements or outlouds designed to draw co-participants’ attention to the visitor’s readiness to move on or to features of the next exhibit. In excerpt 5 Willa upgrades her initial slight turn to the right by leaning her upper body toward her companion; and in excerpt 6 Paula highlights her readiness to move on by leaning further back and describing the neighbouring exhibit as a particular kind. When Jo treats the enhanced action as a proposal to move on and aligns with it Paula extends her retreat from the piece and turns away from the piece in front. Jo follows in her steps and the side-by-side arrangement is transformed that the pair can jointly move to the exhibit Paula has suggested as a candidate exhibit.

Pursuing Proposals

Upgraded or enhanced proposals to withdraw from an exhibit are produced when a co-participant’s action is not seen and treated as an alignment with a proposal to move on. Such upgraded proposals display a participant’s readiness to depart from an exhibit and prefigure the movement to another part of the museum. The actions encourage but do not demand an alignment with the departure; they can be momentarily withdrawn or delayed to allow the co-participant to bring her/his appreciation of the piece in front to a close. In some cases, co-participants continue to display an increased involvement with an exhibit in response to an upgraded proposal. The participant ready to depart may treat the companion’s action as potential or actual resistance to moving on and begin to depart without the companion aligning with the withdrawal from the exhibit. As the participant moves on he orients to the

companion’s display of resistance to depart from the exhibit. Our corpus includes only three excerpts in which a pair of visitors separates after upgraded proposals to jointly move on fail to achieve cooperation.

Figure 7.1.

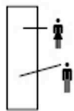


Figure 7.2.



Figure 7.3.



In excerpt 7, Jane and Burt stand side-by-side examining a painting (Figure 7.1.). After a few moments, Burt produces three successive proposals to depart from the painting. First he turns around and faces Jane who without moving continues to look at the piece. He then makes a step outward and stands by his companion’s left shoulder ready to overtake her; she however continues to examine the painting and does not align with his readiness to depart. He briefly stops behind her before moving on and coming to stop at the neighbouring painting. By stopping at three occasions before moving past Jane, Burt offers his partner opportunities to align with his retreat from the exhibit pursuing his proposal to jointly depart from the self-portrait. He displays his commitment to a concerted departure providing his partner with three opportunities to align with the proposal. She however withholds her cooperation and the pair, at least for a short while, separates. The spatial arrangement between the two

participants is reconfigured as Jane keeps on looking at the self-portrait whilst Burt stands and looks at the neighbouring piece (Figure 7.2. – 7.5.).

Figure 7.4.

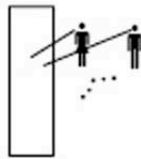


Figure 7.5.



When people jointly explore a museum they establish bodily arrangements that they maintain throughout their visit to the site. They ongoingly organise their actions at and between exhibits to accomplish their visit as a joint visit. In excerpt 6, for example, the couple enter the gallery with Burt following his wife. They turn left and stop at one of the paintings, Burt standing to the left of Jane. They continue their visit maintaining this bodily arrangement until they arrive at the self-portrait that Jane continues to look at when Burt moves past her. When Jane displays her continued involvement with the painting Burt extends his departure. He progressively withdraws from the piece after he has produced subsequent versions of his proposal to depart from the piece, abandoning the attempt to jointly depart from the exhibit.

Whilst in other settings a verbal account may be required to legitimise resistance to align with a proposal or invitation¹, in museums the display of ongoing continued involvement with a work of art is sufficient as an account. Companions pay deference to such an ongoing involvement by virtue of the design of proposals to move on and by departing without nudging the companion onward. They allow her/him to continue with their appreciation of the piece and remain nearby to facilitate the joint continuation of the visit. A few moments later, the companion catches up with the other and they continue their visit as a Withs.

Delaying Departure

Whilst studies increasingly investigate how social interaction and talk among companions influence visitors’ experience of exhibits (cf. Heath and vom Lehn 2004; Leinhardt, Crowley, and Knutson, 2002; McManus 1987) little research explores how people orient to other people’s exploration of exhibitions (Bitgood 1992). Let us briefly return to excerpt 1 (Excerpt 8). Paul and Mary look at the large canvas and after a few moments move to the small sculpture on their right. The departure begins with Mary’s carefully produced movement of her left foot forward to the right and Paul’s alignment with this proposal to depart from the painting (Figure 8.2.). Just a moment prior to the onset of the pair’s departure two visitors arrive behind them (Figure 8.1., arrow). As the other visitors come to stand and examine the painting Mary’s head tilts downward and she begins to move her left foot forward. A moment later, the pair is on the move to the right while the other visitors stay in their position and become involved with the piece (Figure 8.3.).

¹ Houtkoop-Steenstra (1990), for example, explores the emergence of accounts when co-participants hesitate or resist to accept verbal proposals or invitations.

Figure 8.1.

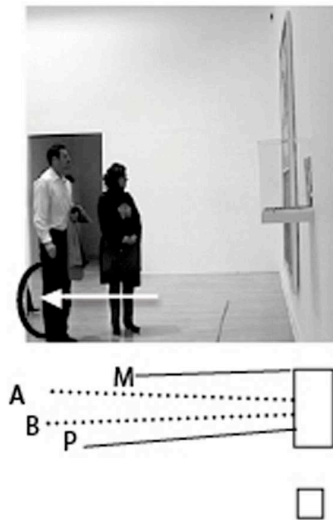


Figure 8.2.

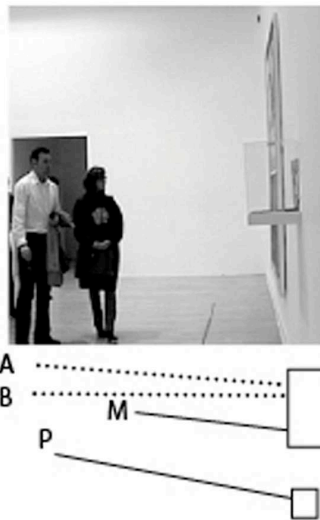
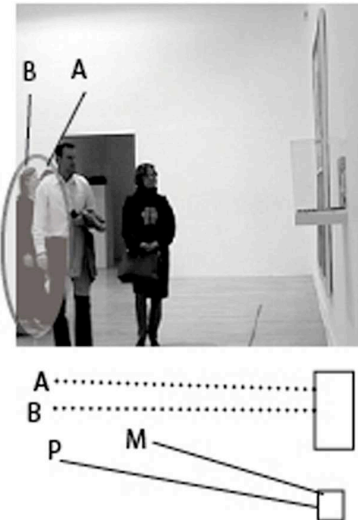


Figure 8.3.



While looking at and examining works of art people remain sensitive to events in the locale. Their awareness of arriving visitors becomes visible by displays of their readiness to move on. In excerpt 8, on arrival of the pair Mary tilts her head down and begins to orient to the right. A moment later, she and Paul depart toward the sculpture on their right.

It seems worthwhile to briefly examine the relationship between on the one hand Mary and Paul and on the other hand the pair arriving behind them. The analysis suggests that the actions leading to Mary and Paul's departure from the painting are sequentially organised. The tight organisation of their actions renders them visible as visitors who are together in the museum; similarly the way in which the two visitors arrive behind Mary and Paul renders them visible as being together. The relationship between Mary and Paul and those two visitors however is very different as Mary and Paul's onward movement through the museum is inconsequential for the pair's further action; the pair examines the large painting without further attending to the departing visitors' actions.

In other cases, people extend their stay at an exhibit while other visitors examine the next piece. In the final excerpt 9 Megan and Anne begin their departure from a

painting when other people at the neighbouring exhibit shift their orientation and then gradually disappear from the locale. While Megan and Anne look at the piece in front Olga and a moment later Giles stand to their left. A few moments later, Olga turns her head from the label to the large canvas to its left and then begins to depart from the painting (Figure 9.3.). Anne attends to Olga’s visible turn to the left by increasing the pace in her utterance, “>go to that area and paint it?<“ (Transcript 9 line 12-13) while remaining oriented to the painting in front, until Giles standing behind Olga also depart from the area (Figure 9.4). On the onset of Giles’ bodily turn Anne followed by Megan retreats from the painting in front and turns to the piece to their left; they then both orient to the large portrait to their left.

Megan and Anne’s departure from the painting and approach of the next painting are sensitive to the conduct of the visitors at the next exhibit. The pace of Anne’s utterance and the timing of her turn to the portrait suggest that while looking at the picture in front she is sensitive to events around her. The actions and orientation of Olga and Giles’ actions to her left implicate her involvement with the piece. On the departure of the two visitors she prepares her departure from the painting. She brings her question to a close and by virtue of her bodily turn and proposes to move on before Megan can answer the question. Megan’s response coincides with the onset of Anne’s retreat from the piece. As Megan completes her utterance, “yah probably a bit of both” (Transcript 9, line 14) she turns around and aligns with the proposed departure from the exhibit (Figure 9.4).

Excerpt 9, Transcript 9

1 A: alright thats coo:l
2 M: really
3
4 (2.6)

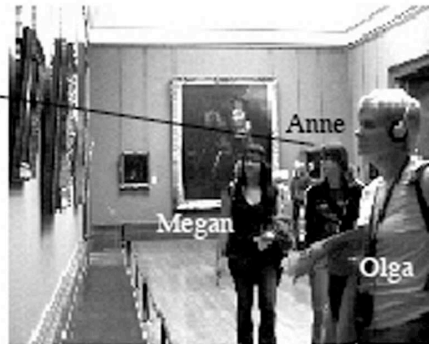


Figure 9.1.

5 M: but its not
6 A: oh::
7 M: yah theres the (finest)
8 (3.6)
9 A: ...hhhh I wonder how many how much
10 of the stuff they see (.) and
11 then they paint or they (.) see it



Figure 9.2.

12 and then they >go to that area
13 and paint it?



Figure 9.3.

14 M: yah (.3) mhm (2.3) probably
15 a bit of both
16 A: =yah



Figure 9.4.

When participants bring the viewing of an exhibit to a close they prepare their departure and onward movement, for example by turning to a next painting. The presence of other visitors at neighbouring exhibits can require that they delay this proposal to move on and delay the constitution of a candidate exhibit. They conduct

actions that extend their ongoing involvement with the current exhibit rather than looking across to the neighbouring painting which may be seen as a violation of other visitors’ “use space” (Goffman 1971). The extension of the activity at the current exhibit is designed as a side involvement; it may involve talk and discussion about the work of art and reading labels and text-panels. These activities can be elongated or cut short allowing visitors not to be seen as putting pressure on others to end their current activity.

Discussion

Theories of the “social order” in public museums have long argued that museum visits are social events. They ascribe the basis for the organisation of people’s conduct to the architecture and layout of museums (Bennett 1995; Bitgood 1992; Huang 2006). These theories about the organisation of the museum visit as well as visitor research that investigates the environmental factors shaping people’s navigation of exhibitions neglect to study the practices through which visitors organise their exploration of museums.

This paper provides a different perspective on visitors’ conduct in museums. It explores how visitors themselves organise their exploring and navigating of galleries by interacting with companions and other visitors. The analysis draws attention to the ways in which visitors produce their actions in close alignment with the actions of others. It suggests that pairs of visitors often stand in a side-by-side arrangement when they examine an exhibit until they transform their bodily arrangement to allow for a concerted onward movement through gallery. This transformation is facilitated by a sequential organisation of the visitors’ departure from the exhibit and their shift in orientation to a potential next exhibit. It is initiated by actions produced by one member of a pair that propose a withdrawal from an exhibit. The co-participant

attends to the proposal to move on by displaying an alignment and by accepting the proposal. The display of an alignment with the proposal allows the first participant to extend the initial action occasioning the co-participant to move further away from the exhibit, and so forth, until the visitors jointly move on.

The aesthetic experience of works of art is often conceptualised as an individual and cognitive accomplishment (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). The analysis suggests that museum visitors explore galleries interaction with others. They stand next to companions while independently inspecting different aspects of the same object and occasionally engaging in talk and interaction with them. The independent examination of the pieces is facilitated by the “elbow-room” (Hughes 1958) that the participants create for the appreciation of the exhibits. Independent examination and togetherness are produced in interaction.

The togetherness of visitors becomes particularly apparent when the independent examination of an exhibit is transformed into a joint departure from it. It involves the transforming of a side-by-side arrangement facing a particular work of art into an arrangement that allows for a concerted onward movement to a different exhibit or exhibition area. In the transformation of side-by-side arrangements participants pay deference to companions’ and other people’s ongoing involvement with the current exhibit. It begins with an action that is produced at an opportune moment when the co-participants’ actions suggest they are shifting orientation; it is designed to display a readiness to move on and avoids nudging or disturbing the others’ ongoing appreciation of a piece. If the co-participants attend to the action by also displaying a readiness to depart a proposal to depart from the exhibit is produced. The proposal involves a withdrawal from the current exhibit and a trajectory for the continuation of the visit. Co-participants often treat the companion’s shift in orientation as a proposal

to move on and accept it; or if the acceptance is not produced immediately it arises shortly after, when they attend to upgraded or embellished version of the proposal.

The analysis therefore suggests that in museums a Withs is not an entity that jointly moves through the exhibitions but Withs are ongoingly produced, maintained and managed as participants examine works of art and explore the galleries. The maintaining of Withs requires participants to ongoingly be aware of each other’s orientation and state of involvement with the exhibition. It is facilitated by bodily side-by-side arrangements when examining exhibits and walking through the gallery. This bodily arrangement facilitates the “mutual monitoring” (Heath and Luff 1992) of each other’s orientation from the corner of the eye allowing for the noticing of even slight changes in other people’s orientation. Based on their monitoring of each other participants produce actions that align with proposed shifts in orientation, that looking at exhibits and exploring galleries become visible as a joint activity accomplished by Withs. The simultaneous examination of the same exhibit, the ongoing mutual orientation to each other’s changing states of involvement coupled with the organisation of their movement from one exhibit to a next becomes visible as the “silent, shuffling along the gallery walls” that Hirschauer (2006) describes as “museum discipline”.

As visitors explore galleries with companions they orient to the material environment. Even when walking side-by-side and talking with each other people look to the exhibits hung along the gallery walls; and when bringing the examination of an exhibit to a close people turn to exhibits they may inspect next. These candidate exhibits are in visual range of the visitors and provide them with resources to produce a trajectory for the continuation of their visit. Proposals to depart from an exhibit often involve an orientation to candidate exhibits. When an alignment with the

proposal is achieved visitors progressively withdraw together from the current exhibit and walk in the direction of the candidate exhibit. They may not stop at that exhibit but walk past it and become involved with another exhibit or exhibition area.

Aside from the paper’s contribution to our understanding of the social organisation of museum visiting the analysis may be of wider concern also for research exploring people’s exploration of other public spaces. In recent years, a growing body of studies has emerged that explores how people socially organise their movement across public places, both on foot and by car (Broth and Lundstrom 2011; Collett and Marsh 1981; Haddington and Keisanen; Laurier, Maze, and Lundin 2006; McIlvenny, Broth, and Haddington 2009). These studies often take an autoethnographic or ethnomethodological standpoint that allows for the uncovering of participants’ perspective when moving from one place to another. This chapter contributes to this research by exploring the social and sequential organisation of people’s movement across a public place. It highlights how even slight changes in orientation and postural shifts are produced in close coordination with other visitors. The accomplishment of bodily movements is sensitive to and organised in alignment with other people’s orientation; others often treat postural and orientational shifts as relevant for their own navigation in public spaces and orient or even align with it. By displaying awareness of and sensitivity to others’ ongoing state of involvement with exhibits people show their fitting in in the museum situation. Unlike children who are being told not to run around and encroach on other people and teenagers who are being shushed participants fit in the social occasion of the museum by moving slowly along the gallery walls with regard to their companions’ and others’ examining of works of art.

Apart from these more substantive observations the chapter also makes a small methodological contribution. Conversation analysis is primarily concerned with the sequential organisation of talk and reveals the turn-taking organisation employed in conversation (Sacks 1992; Schegloff 2007). The organisation of people’s navigation of museums is often accomplished with no or little talk. The lack of talk is compensated by the tight organisation of visitors’ bodily actions that has characteristics analogous to the sequential organisation elaborated on in conversation analysis (Sacks 1992). Lacking a clearer vocabulary or a more suitable analytical framework I have used terms like “proposal” or “accepting” and “declining” to describe the social organisation of the participants’ actions, that have been derived from conversation analysis. Whilst these terms might not be entirely appropriate to capture the organisation of bodily actions they help to reveal and bring to the fore the sequential organisation of participants’ departure from exhibits. This sequential organisation of actions in front of works of art enables people to visit a museum together and create a joint experience of exhibitions whilst individually appreciating the works of art. So far, little research examines the social and interactional aspects of people’s exploration of exhibitions. This paper, I hope, has made a small contribution to address this gap in research.

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